

“That They May Be One”

John 17

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It was one of the greatest heartaches of my life and I debated within for a long time about whether to tell about it or not.

I was in a room in the west wing of this building with the staff and elders of our church.

We were talking about being a church, a community of people, where every person has at least one other who is fighting for his or her soul.

When we spoke of fighting for each others' souls we meant caring enough about each other that we would enter into the greatest struggles of each other's lives, listening, caring, praying, and helping in every way possible to share the burden, resolve the problem, and stay in the relationship even if the struggle never ended.

The debate within ended when I finally realized that the burden was too heavy to carry alone and that these men and women loved me.

It would not be appropriate to tell of that heartache here, but I told it there.

And I experienced the relief of a load shared when those men and women prayed for me, literally hugged me, and most importantly continued to pray for me and talk with me about that heartache that to this day has not been resolved.

That is at least some of what spiritual community means.

And it is “spiritual” not only because it is engaged at the deepest personal spirit-to-spirit level but just as importantly because it acknowledges and consciously draws into the relationship the Spirit of God.

It is “spiritual” community when it is a three-way relationship – you, me and God.

It is “spiritual” when our relationship (yours and mine) is incomplete without interaction with God.

And when my relationship with God is incomplete without interaction with you.

The men and women in that room are not just good friends who care about me and each other.

These are men and women who are Christian, who trust and love God, for whom prayer is not just wishful thinking, and who bring the Word of God to bear on every situation.

In many conversations following that time I shared my heartache with the staff and elders, several of them individually talked with me about the situation and usually with a renewed commitment to pray and usually with encouragement or challenge from God's Word – with God himself drawn into the relationship.

We have been talking much the past several months about “spiritual community.”

As I said last week, the definition of that term seems vague.

But when understood it is about belonging, truly belonging.

- It is about being loved and loving.
- It is about a relationship with God and other Christians that is secure, empowering, fulfilling and lasting.
- It is about life as God created life to be lived.

Last Sunday I tried to make the case that God would not be God were he not a Trinity; were it not for the relationship of love that exists between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Secondly that we would not be fully human apart from relationships because we are made in the image of God who exists in relationship.

And thirdly that we would not be Christian apart from the church, the people of God, because being Christian is by definition to be joined to the body of Christ, the church.

As Jesus neared the end of his earthly ministry, it is recorded in the Gospel of John that on Passover he called his disciples aside to be with them, to instruct them and to pray for them.

It is a part of his prayer that I draw your attention to this morning.

After Jesus prayed specifically for those disciples in the room with him, he prayed for us.

- Before we read the prayer, I want you to remember this is God the Son praying to God the Father.
- This is no stream-of-consciousness, “shoot-from-the-lip” prayer.
- This is a prayer that the result of his mission would be exactly what he and his father had planned.

Earlier Jesus had said that he came to give life, life to the full. Here is a definition of the life God calls us to.

John 17:20-23 “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³ I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

What does Jesus here say is his ultimate goal for us?
It is “spiritual community.”

And how does Jesus define that?

John 17:21 “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us...”

Jesus uses the relationship between himself and the Father as a model of the relationship he desires for us together with him.

And what is the relationship between the Father and the Son?

Read any one of the Gospels and you get an immediate and impressive sense of the intimacy of that relationship.

I would summarize it by saying it was a relationship so close that to know the purposes of the one was to know the purposes of the other, to see the actions of the one was to see the actions of the other, and to know the love for one was to know the love for the other.

Jesus prays that our relationships with one another will reflect that kind of oneness.

I know I don't understand all the implications of that and I know further I can't begin to unpack all that would mean in our relationships with each other.

But I can't deny or ignore that such a relationship is precisely what Jesus has called us to.

But I want you to see that this unity is not just between us but is also a three-way unity – us collectively and God.

John 17:21 “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. **May they also be in us...**”

To be “in” God the Son and God the Father is, as Jesus describes in John 15:5 when he speaks of himself as the Vine and us as the branches, to be so connected to, so dependent on and so identified with God that we are like an extension of him.

Do you know how some long-time-married men and women begin not only to think **for** each other but also to think **like** each other and even to **look like** each other?

To be in God is to increasingly think and act like God.

But it is not just actions; it is also a mutual affection.

To be “in” God is to be part of that unclouded relationship that exists between the Father, Son and Spirit.

It is to be part of the family; it is to be accepted and truly belong.

Continuing in his passionate prayer, Jesus says,

John 17:22 “I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me.

Do you remember when Philip asked Jesus to show them the Father?
What did Jesus say?

“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. ”

Jesus gave us the glory, he showed us God; he revealed God to us; he demonstrated who God is.

And in Jesus’ relationship to the Father we see what it means to be united in love and purpose.

And again it is not just that in our relationships **with each other** we reflect the unity of the Father and the Son but that we are drawn **into them** as well – Jesus in us and the Father in the Son.

Again, spiritual community is a three-way relationship – you and me together and God.

Jesus concludes this theme of his prayer with these words:

17:23 “May they be brought to **complete unity** to let the world know that you sent me **and have loved them even as you have loved me.**

Certainly here Jesus recognizes that unity is a process; it is something we will grow into.

But his goal for us is “complete unity” – a unity that reflects the oneness of the Father and Son.

Jesus has not called us just to be “good little Christians” doing the good Christian things.

He has called us into true spiritual community with him and each other.

This is an un-compromised oneness of affection and purpose.

This is so lofty and ideal that I can scarcely imagine it, but again I can’t deny that is what Jesus has called us to.

I haven’t mentioned it yet but I’m certain you have noticed something else about this prayer.

Twice Jesus notes that it is the unity of the people of God, true spiritual community, that will make the love of God believable to a watching world.

Yes, the preaching, teaching and witnessing to the truth of who Jesus is and what he has done is essential.

But the Spirit of God uses his new society, the church, as a testimony to unbelievers that God in Christ loves us and them.

Some have called our love for each other the final or ultimate apologetic – the strongest argument possible for God’s love and power in the world.

In his book, It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian, Tod Bolsinger writes, “Some years ago, a woman walked into my office and said ‘I’d like you to help me become a Christian and baptize me.’”

Tod says that he was flabbergasted because he thought he was supposed to talk her into that by using a couple of spiritual laws or something.

Tod assured her that he would help her but he said she had to tell him what had happened in her life to bring her to this point.

She said that a year or so earlier she had come to one of their adult groups in the church and it was great.

“I got to know those wonderful people. I loved the way they interacted with one another and cared for one another; I knew they had something I didn’t have.

“I didn’t grow up in a religious home and I’ve wandered through lots of different things, just searching and struggling at times.

“When I came to the group, I decided that whatever they had, I really wanted.

“But as you taught about Jesus, I just had too many intellectual questions.

“Ultimately, I decided that I needed to leave the group because at the core of your beliefs was the conviction that Jesus was God and I just didn’t believe it; a spiritual teacher or a prophet maybe, but not God.

“So I continued to search. But after leaving the group I was so lonely that I started to ask myself why I was having trouble making relationships.

“I came to admit that my biggest problem stemmed from having grown up in an alcoholic home. So I joined a 12-step program for adult children of alcoholics.

“I tried to seek a ‘higher power’, even though I didn’t know what that was.

“As I prayed and experienced a sense of peace, I wanted to know my ‘higher power’ better, so – I don’t really know why – but I picked up a Bible that I had when I was in the group at your church and I started reading.

“And as I read, I recognized my “Higher Power” was right there in the Gospels.

“All of a sudden I realized that the Jesus on that page was the same one you were talking about...

“And so I decided that I would come and ask you to help me become a Christian.”

Tod said, “What happened to your intellectual problems

She responded, “They all went away. Jesus was the only one who made sense.

“And only the Trinity that you Christians believe in could make sense of the fact that I had experienced the same love in your fellowship, the same joy in prayer, and the same truth in the word in front of me.

That had to be the one God, that’s the one I want to follow”

Tod writes, “It was probably the first time in my life I met someone who became a Trinitarian before becoming a Christian.” (Bolsinger 56-57)

The unity (the relationships) of the Christians in that Sunday School group was the ultimate apologetic for that young woman.

Jesus said it this way: John 17:23 “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

I have mentioned many times before that God’s ultimate goal is not just to take a bunch of saved sinners to heaven.

Furthermore his goal is not just the absence of sin in our lives.

Christianity gets reduced to keeping from doing too much bad until we die or until Jesus comes so that we can pass some kind of divine test and are allowed into heaven.

For some it seems that negatives define Christianity.

For some it seems, to be a Christian is to **not** use the Lord's name in vain, or steal, or commit adultery, or to covet my neighbor's spouse or property, or lie, etc.

But Jesus said he came to give us life and real life is not simply the absence of actions; it is not what we don't do.

Life is active; it is what we do.

Sometimes we speak of the Christian life in terms of "holiness"; that we are called by God to be holy.

But holiness is not just the absence of certain bad habits or attitudes.

Holiness is about being set apart to be like Christ.

But even in saying that I don't think I have said enough.

It is too easy to think of Christ-likeness in terms of the absence of sin as if Christ-likeness was a kind of "pious", above-life, never-think-or-do-anything-wrong lifestyle.

But Christ-likeness is to bear the image of Christ, to be like him.

And Christ is love in action; and love doesn't exist apart from relationships.

The ultimate goal then is not some kind of isolated, individual Christ-like sinlessness, but a full, alive, relationship with God and others that is like God's relationship in the Trinity and his relationship with us.

Life is not ultimately about jobs, houses, and hobbies but about relationships with God and one another.

I believe in God.

I believe that God exists from eternity past to eternity future.

I believe that God created human beings to live in relationship with each other and together to enjoy God's presence and grace.

I believe that because of our self-centered sin our relationship with God and one another is broken and we are now and for eternity destined for a self-imposed isolation from God and others.

I believe that God has a plan to restore us to an eternal relationship with himself and each other.

I believe that the choices and relationships we make now are the ones we will live with consciously for eternity.

Most of us believe in heaven; we believe that when a Christian dies, his or her spirit is ushered into heaven.

We further believe that when Jesus comes again, this earth will be destroyed and a new earth will be created which will be the eternal home of all believers of all time.

What will that eternal existence be like?

Some say we can't know.

But the Bible says we can know.

The Apostle Paul wrote that according to the Lord's own word we can know some of what will happen and what it will be like.

What is the most important thing we can say about what heaven will be like?

Listen to the Bible describe it:

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be **with the Lord forever**.

In Paul's words, what is the most important result of end-of-time event?

To be with the Lord and with each other.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul was writing about a certain tension he lived with – on the one hand a desire to continue living and serving the Philippian Christians and on the other hand a desire to die.

No, he was not suicidal or otherwise attempting to escape life. Instead he had such a strong desire for heaven that he could hardly wait.

But what I want you to notice is what it was about heaven that so attracted him.

Here's the way he said it: "I desire to depart and **be with Christ.**" (Philippians 1:23)

When the Apostle John was describing heaven in the final chapters of the book of Revelation, notice what captured his attention:

Revelation 21:3-4 "'Now the dwelling of **God** is with men, and he **will live with them.** They will be his people, and **God himself will be with them** and be their God..."

When Jesus, himself, described what heaven would be like here is what he said:

John 14:2-3 "I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take **you** to be with me that you also **may be where I am.**

What is heaven like?

Oh yes it will be all the good things we can imagine, but most importantly, most significantly, it will be the place where Jesus and our brothers and sisters in the Lord are.

It will be home, in every positive connotation that word ought to give.

Even when the Bible describes hell it does so in terms of the loss of relationship.

2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and **shut out from the presence of the Lord** and from the majesty of his power."

Life now and forever is about relationships.

There are married men and women in Iraq this morning who long for the day when they can return home.

And for most of them, the longing is not for their jobs, their cars, or their hobbies but for their loved ones.

When the news cameras focus on returning soldiers they don't capture their first day back at work, they capture

their reunion with husbands and wives, with children, or with parents.

Anyone, except maybe the most narcissistic, recognizes that life is most importantly about relationships.

I don't expect 6 and 16 year olds to necessarily grasp the significance of that but if we haven't understood it by the time we're 26, we will give our lives away to what doesn't truly matter in the long run.

As I said last week, God is Trinity, he has lived from eternity past in relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

When he made us, he made us to bear his image – to likewise live in relationship with him and each other.

The first story of Adam and Eve in Genesis is not about sin but about relationships.

In the first account of the creation of Adam and Eve, in chapter 1 of Genesis, after God looked at them and at all that he created and said it was good.

God's intention was to create a humanity that would enjoy his love; that would live in enjoyment of relationship with him and each other.

But Genesis chapter 3 makes it clear that the sin of self-centeredness, the antithesis of loving relationships, broke the relationships that God intended.

And the tensions that were created between that first man and woman erupted almost immediately into death itself as one of their sons, following in the steps of his parents' self-centeredness, murdered the other of their sons.

Much of what follows in the Old Testament is a story of the ruinous effects of the loss of relationship with God and each other.

Cain and Abel, the wickedness of people resulting in the flood, the pride of people resulting in the confusion of languages at the tower of Babel, the failures of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Judah along with some of the stories of David and Solomon as

well as Ahab and Jezebel attest to the enduring diabolical character of pride and the devastating effect it has on relationships.

But the Bible is not just a chronicle of chaos.

The message of the Bible is God's re-creation of his people.

- The theme from Genesis 3:15, through every book of the Old Testament is that God is working a plan to restore human beings, us, to a relationship with him and each other.
- And the story of the New Testament is the fulfillment of that plan – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to effect our re-creation.

And again I say the goal of Christianity is not escape from hell or just refraining from sin until we die.

God's goal for us is that we reflect his glory; that we bear his image – that we be like him.

Again as Jesus said it, John 17:21 "May (they) be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us..."

Spiritual community is not a means to an end, it is the end.

Spiritual community is the goal God sent his Son to accomplish.

It is in spiritual community, our love for God and each other that we reflect the very nature of God, for God is love.

In fact, so serious is God about the goal of spiritual community that the Apostle John writes,

1 John 4:7, 20-21 "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.... If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."

If you don't love each other, you don't love God.

Our love for God is demonstrated most supremely in our love for each other.

Now this lofty ideal gets immensely practical when we read Jesus' words in John 15

John 15:12 "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

How are we to love each other?

"Love each other as I have loved you."

The standard of my love for you is to be the way Jesus loves me.
How has Jesus loved me?

15:13 "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

1 John 3:16 "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

Would I die for you?

I think God know that it would often be easier to die for each other than to live for each other.

And so John continues: 1 John 3:17-18 "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

Will I put my wants and even needs aside to serve you?

We are going to look at that more closely next week as we study Philippians 2:1-8 where we read:

"Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus..."